

CHARLIE

by

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Charlie

At the age of ten, Charlie Warner knew things about women that are just now coming into focus for me.

I met Charlie in 1942, shortly after my family moved to the Bridgeport area of Chicago. He was one of the first friends I made, and he eased my transition to the new neighborhood. We were both ten years old, but the similarity ended there. Even at this young age, Charlie appeared to have seen it all, although he didn't need to advertise the fact. Whatever wisdom he imparted seemed to emerge naturally in the course of conversations.

As I got to know Charlie better, I became aware of one talent that overshadowed all the others—an uncanny ability to attract women of all ages. He seemed to have a remarkable instinct for knowing their true desires and accommodating them.

Whatever Charlie did not know about women and sexual matters, he certainly could have made up. I had neither the experience nor the knowledge to challenge him. My approach was to pick up information about sex along the way, without letting on how little I knew—a formula that guaranteed an extended learning curve.

Charlie

What made Charlie so attractive to women? Certainly not his appearance. He was short for his age, had a round florid face and very thick lips. He wasn't fat, just soft—the type who didn't enjoy physical exertion. Charlie played on our neighborhood baseball and basketball teams, but it was obvious that sports were a secondary concern. No one questioned whether Charlie was serious when, shortly before his eighteenth birthday, he announced that upon reaching this milestone, he intended to retire from athletics. He said that he had had a decent career, and it was time to “hang it up.” To my knowledge, he never attempted a comeback.

Charlie seemed to exist in another world. His habits and interests consistently ran counter to mine, but this just made him all the more fascinating.

Many of his pursuits were mysteries to me. At the age of eleven, for example, he spent almost an entire day washing down the enclosed back porch where he lived and spreading sheets of newspaper on the built-in wooden bench. Charlie explained that this was in preparation for a tryst that evening with one of his current girlfriends.

The fact that he *had* a girlfriend set him apart from the rest of us and gave him near-mythical status. All the women in the neighborhood seemed to like Charlie and he liked them. While Charlie's girlfriends were usually attractive, he was attentive and solicitous to all women.

By the time we were thirteen, it was not unusual for us to see a second-floor window of one of the flats open, and a woman in her twenties or thirties stick her head out and call, “Charlie. Charlie, could you come up here for a min-

Charlie

ute?" Charlie always excused himself and was out of touch for a time. Efforts to elicit information were fruitless. He did not tell tales about his exploits, but a knowing smile or some other sign set what imaginations we had soaring. I doubt that there is an age when imagination and ignorance come together as easily and with more creative results.

It seemed that Charlie could talk with authority on almost any subject. He wasn't particularly smart in an academic sense, school didn't interest him and he dropped out at sixteen, but he was curious and articulate about what he read, heard and experienced.

The news fascinated Charlie, and he had a world-weary way of discussing it. He was a city boy who was years ahead of the times in his appreciation of country music—the lyrics touched him in ways the rest of us were too insensitive to appreciate. Charlie had a sentimental side we all noted and mildly ridiculed.

His parents were very indulgent, particularly of his dietary and sleeping habits. He liked to stay up late and get up late. Charlie almost single-handedly kept Royal Crown Cola in business in the forties. I'm not sure what he ate for dinner, but his breakfast and lunch usually consisted of a bottle of this cloyingly sweet cola and a Twinkie.

Charlie's utterly independent spirit extended to almost everything. On one occasion, when several of us went horseback riding, we were asked to choose English or western saddles. Charlie was the only one who chose the English version.

Charlie

Charlie's horse, Thunder, obviously sensing an inexperienced rider, decided to have some fun. Thunder started slowly down the path but then suddenly broke into a gallop. Charlie reacted by pulling hard on the reins. Thunder stopped abruptly, sending Charlie airborne. In midflight, the command "Whoa" was still trailing from his lips and his hands were clasped around an imaginary pommel, the knob-like structure which a western saddle has but an English saddle does not.

Charlie slowly and gingerly got to his feet, concluded that his battered body was intact and then bid us adieu. He would remain at the stable and await our return. His riding days were over.

My attitude toward horses also suffered a blow that day. Teaser, the name I have since bestowed on my stallion, shared Thunder's disdain for the novice. First, despite my efforts to redirect him, he walked over to a large tree and proceeded to rub and press one of my legs against the tree trunk. Then he began to dart under low branches, apparently in the hope that one would snap off my head.

Once we got a little farther down the trail, Teaser settled down and stayed on the path. By this time, the rest of my friends were well ahead of me, and I was riding alone. It was hot, and Teaser was panting from the heat. I decided to give him a break by getting off. Foolishly, I didn't hang on to the reins or tie the reins to a tree. The first thing Teaser did was walk off the trail about ten feet from where I was standing. When I stepped toward him, he moved away again and stood there. When I ran toward him, he took off into the

Charlie

woods. I went after him. He led me down ravines and up ridges. Each time I stopped, so did Teaser. Ridicule was clearly on his mind. After almost an hour of this, I was exhausted, angry and lost. Fortunately, just before total panic set in, I stumbled upon the trail and a kindly soul came by who let me ride double with him back to the stable. It was a day of ignominy for Charlie and me, and it was some time before we lived it down.

Just before we entered high school, our loose collection of neighborhood friends and acquaintances began to coalesce into a somewhat more formal organization. The words "club" and "gang" were used interchangeably, and generally referred to groups from a specific geographical territory with fairly strict boundaries, usually drawn along ethnic lines. At this time, Bridgeport was a German, Irish, Italian and Slavic community. The Irish and Italians lived in closely defined areas east of Halsted Street, while the Germans and Slavs were concentrated west of Halsted.

For a brief period we were known as the Robins. I liked the colors of the robin and thought the bird would look good on our club jackets. No one else seemed to care what we called ourselves, so I had a clear shot at choosing the name. About a year later, I decided that we shouldn't be the Robins anymore, we should be the Gaels. I was swept up in the publicity given to the Gaels of St. Mary's in Moraga, California, a tiny college that was one of the top football powers in the mid-forties. Again, no one else cared. We became the Gaels, and the name stuck.

Charlie

As for how we were perceived by other gangs, it wouldn't have mattered if we had called ourselves the Deranged Destroyers—we still would have had a serious image problem. Simply put, no one feared us. The reasons were not difficult to understand. We lacked warlike tendencies, and we never made forays into hostile territory. If we had been Native Americans, we probably would have belonged to one of the tribes that sent their women to fight for them.

While we didn't go out of our way to look for trouble, it managed to find us all too frequently. Most of the risks we took and the problems we encountered involved sports activities and ethnic rivalries. Sometimes the two coincided. For example, there was a very high possibility that mayhem would erupt when we played basketball against one particular Italian team at their gym. A low balcony encircled the gym floor, and the smallest incident would trigger a riot, with their fellow gang members leaping out of the stands to do battle.

The name of a nearby rival gang, the Gremlins, did not conjure up as fearful an image as some others we had to confront, but their reputation for toughness certainly exceeded ours.

One summer night in 1947, we were taking turns boxing each other using two sets of gloves. There were about ten of us under a neighborhood street lamp. A short time after we started, twenty or more members of the Gremlins turned a corner and came within view about a block away. They were obviously looking for a fight. I once saw a pack of dogs turn that corner with the same expression. I have long since for-

Charlie

gotten what the Gremlins were upset about. Perhaps it was just that the hot, muggy air had spawned a truculent spirit.

Charlie, on a whim and without portfolio, made a battlefield decision to meet them halfway and negotiate some form of settlement. I looked on in wonder as he approached the Gremlins alone. He had his arms raised and his hands extended outward and slightly in front of his body, the traditional way to communicate, "Stay where you are; I mean no harm; can we discuss this in a peaceful and friendly way." Louis and Clark must have used a similar gesture as they entered hostile Indian villages.

The rest of us, still under the street lamp, could see that Charlie was successful in engaging the Gremlins in discussion, although we could not hear anything. I was able to remain calm until Charlie returned and reported how he managed to avoid a crisis. Charlie had proposed that all differences between us could be settled simply by having one Gremlin and one Gael put on boxing gloves and fight each other. They agreed. Charlie had then offered me as our representative. When I heard this, my amazement quickly turned to anger, and I erupted at Charlie.

Unlike Abe Lincoln, who was easily coaxed into upholding the honor of his New Salem community by agreeing to fight one of the toughest men from an adjoining town, I did not accept the challenge with composure and grace. But I knew that I had no choice. The only way I could think of to retaliate was to shame Charlie into putting on the gloves along with me. I suggested that his opponent should be none other than the one with whom he negotiated this ar-

Charlie

rangement, a short, compact, and rugged kid known as Dom-Dom. To my surprise, Charlie agreed.

It's possible Charlie was so involved in his romantic escapades that he did not keep up with the tough-guy pecking order. I almost felt sorry for him.

Donny Kopek was my opponent, and the fight went better than I had any right to expect. Kopek and I were fairly well matched and neither one of us embarrassed himself.

It was now Charlie's turn. I had never seen Charlie fight before, and I did not see him fight that night. I saw him dance, weave, bob, shuffle, duck and jab, without landing a single punch. Dom-Dom did not have this problem. He pounded Charlie at will for three rounds before the gloves were mercifully removed and the tension of the evening faded.

As you are now aware, outside his area of expertise, Charlie was quite capable of making decisions that would return to haunt, even hurt, him. I recall another incident that illustrates this trait and the folly of acting out of anger.

In our mid-teens, some of us started to go roller-skating at an old armory in a run-down section south of the Loop. One Saturday, Charlie and I went by ourselves. When the last organ piece ended, we turned in our skates and started home. In order to catch our streetcar, we had to walk a few blocks down a dark, deserted street. A short distance from the rink, we were pulled into an alley by about eight guys who had also been skating at the armory. I didn't know any of them, and they didn't seem interested in me, only in

Charlie

Charlie. Apparently he had paid too much attention to one of their girlfriends at the rink. Charlie denied he had done anything and then appealed to their pocketbook. "Look," he said, "why don't you take what you want, just so no one gets hurt." The first thing they went for was Charlie's watch, which had an expandable band. One of them got hold of it and tried to pull it off. "No, anything but that," said Charlie. "My mother gave it to me." The guy let it snap back onto Charlie's wrist and then immediately went for the ring he was wearing. "Not that either," pleaded Charlie. But they took it. Before letting us go, a few of them delivered some hard blows to Charlie's body and then warned him not to fool around with their girlfriends anymore.

Charlie had recognized one of them and knew his gang affiliation. He was upset and angry all the way home, vowing to get even. I had never seen him this way before, and I couldn't believe my ears when he said, "I'm going to join the Jesters."

The Jesters were one of Bridgeport's most notorious gangs. Highly structured and disciplined, they had a clubhouse near 33rd and Morgan where they held mandatory weekly meetings. Their leader, Lefty Greer, was a humorless, brutal street fighter.

Charlie joined the Jesters, and the Jesters kept their part of the bargain. They drove their large, open-roofed truck filled with gang members across Halsted, found their prey and delivered an unmistakable message on behalf of Charlie.

Charlie had been avenged, but he had also incurred obligations. His real problems were just beginning.

Charlie

Some weeks later a few of us were sitting in Al's, the store where we hung out, when Lefty Greer walked in and asked where he could find Charlie Warner. We told Greer that we hadn't seen Charlie in a while. Greer was both cool and menacing as he said that Charlie had not attended recent Jester meetings and that he had better be at the next one.

Charlie showed up at Al's just after Greer had left. When he heard about Greer's visit, Charlie reached for a cigarette. Unlike the bad-guy, movie-coolness of Lefty Greer, Charlie always looked as if he were lighting his first cigarette. He had a way of positioning it on the edge of his lips that made it almost impossible to keep steady. The cigarette would move uncontrollably up and down. As I recounted Greer's message, Charlie was having an especially difficult time bringing the match and the fluttering cigarette together.

Protection had consequences. Charlie was no longer free. He had to lay low for many months. The next time we played the Jesters in softball, Charlie was among the missing. He urged us to tell Greer that he would be on an extended vacation with his family and might, in fact, never return.

For most of the forties, Al's was the center of our universe. Even when we had a neighborhood clubhouse, we kept gravitating to this spot like trained pigeons.

There were three owners during the seven years we used the store for a hangout. The amiable Mrs. Pole was the owner when I moved to Bridgeport, but about a year later she sold it to Al Fleckenstein.

Al was a near-perfect store owner. He had a gentle but

Charlie

humorous way of poking fun at us and seemed to enjoy our giving it back to him. This is not to say he didn't get angry. He did, it just didn't happen very often.

While we thought that Al was up to dealing with us on a daily basis, it turned out that his nervous system was more delicate than any of us imagined. After only a few years, Al sold the store to Kay and Dominic Bartuzzi. We continued to refer to it as Al's.

The atmosphere changed dramatically. Kay was fairly calm, but Dominic had an explosive temper. To our dismay, we found that this was his friendly side. When he was truly angry at us, he walked briskly to the side door and held it open without saying a word. He didn't have to. This was the signal that Dominic's capacity for tolerance had been breached and that we had a ticking time bomb on our hands. The drill, whenever this happened, was for us to get up off our chairs and exit the store quickly and quietly, in single file. As we moved in lock-step out the door, no one dared to look at or challenge Dominic. It usually took at least forty-eight hours before he cooled down and it was safe to return.

The store almost defies description, but permit me to try. It was a single-story, pie-shaped building, probably not exceeding eight hundred square feet, located at the intersection of 31st Street, Lyman Avenue and Lock Street.

Inside, there were two counters at right angles to each other. One counter was the soda fountain and the other was for the short-order restaurant part of the operation. The grill behind this counter was always so black and greasy I

Charlie

never ordered a hamburger or anything else that had to be cooked on it. There was a candy counter in the back on the 31st Street side along with a few booths. We used these booths only when one of us had a soda date—a rare occasion. One of the exceptions was Melvin Holte, a member of our group who regularly took his girlfriend there. He was so enraptured he didn't care that the rest of us ogled as he sat transfixed, staring into her eyes. One of fourteen children, I don't think Melvin understood the concept of privacy and, therefore, he did not need it.

Al's did a big newspaper business. On Saturday nights, bundles of the Sunday newspapers were piled five-feet high, filling the large platform next to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and spilling out onto other open areas of the store.

In the center, off the two counter aisles, were a few small tables and chairs. When we were inside, this is where we congregated.

The urge to gather seemed to drive our day. Once we were together, the paramount need was to keep ourselves amused and ward off boredom. This posed a constant challenge.

One evening, someone had the idea of calling a drug-store at random and asking if they had Prince Albert in a can. On hearing that they did, our next line was, "Well, let him out!" It was a test of discipline to see which of us could make the call without breaking into uncontrollable laughter. Who knows how long we would have continued calling for Albert's release if we had not learned that the gag was old when the Prince himself was alive.

When the weather turned warm, we collected outside on

Charlie

the corner, and our numbers increased dramatically, adding more personalities to the mix. The paradox of teenagers needing to conform and yet be regarded as different is well established. It didn't matter how we were different, as long as something distinguished each of us from everyone else. There was no need to worry—not one of us came close to having a clone.

Teddy Kajakowski, one of the weirder characters who hung out with us, seemed to work harder than most to craft his unique image. His parents owned a small cleaning store in the neighborhood, which automatically placed Teddy in the upper class. He was the only one among us who had his own car—an old Ford coupe.

One of the fads at the time was to attach a knob to the steering wheel so that the driver could easily turn the car with one hand. Teddy had the peculiar habit of sliding the front seat of his car so far forward that he was literally pinned to the wheel. The move forced him to sit bolt upright at a perfect 90-degree angle to the seat. Teddy drove this way all the time. When he maneuvered the steering knob, the distance between his chest and right hand was microscopic.

One summer night about forty of us, many more than usual, were hanging out on the corner. Teddy, who had been cruising the neighborhood in his car, spotted our crowd outside Al's and came to a screeching, attention-getting halt. He must have wanted us to know he could stop his car on a dime without piercing his chest with the wheel knob. Teddy, who often spoke before thinking, carefully

Charlie

perused the crowd, saw that his friend Bill Baxter was not there and asked, "Where's everybody at?" Where indeed.

Educators have long known that mastering a skill requires both instruction and experience. Five years after meeting Charlie, I had acquired precious little experience and was still uncomfortable around girls. Whatever success I had was relegated to a fantasy life.

I encountered a pathetic reminder of this recently while I was searching through old photographs and came across the frayed picture of Donna Fernhammer, my pretend girlfriend of old.

Jack Yardley, a high school friend who lived outside the neighborhood, had shown me her picture sometime during my sophomore year at St. Rita's. She looked great. Yardley gave me the picture and said he would introduce her to me as soon as she broke up with her current boyfriend. It was to be a long wait, but the situation suited me perfectly. None of my Bridgeport friends knew this girl, I had her picture and could pretend I was seeing her. After all, it would just be a matter of time before she was mine.

While I didn't dwell on my social shortcomings, I certainly recognized I had them. What I did not realize was that my parents were aware of my slow development and looking eagerly for signs that I was coming out of it.

I unconsciously relieved some of their anxiety when I accepted Charlie's invitation to attend a party at Carol Armcaster's house. Carol was one of the wilder girls in the neighborhood. This was my first boy-girl party, and I should

Charlie

have been better prepared for my parents' exuberant reaction. They were far too overjoyed.

It only got worse as I began to prepare for the party. They hovered over me like bees. My father, acting totally out of character, used one application after another of Brill Creme in a vain attempt to gain control of my cowlick. He was also acting slightly giddy, another departure from his usual no-nonsense, John Wayne-type personality. I left for Carol's wearing my newly acquired red and gray Gaels jacket and feeling mildly mortified by the attention my parents were paying to me.

Carol Armcaster, the hostess, had many rough edges and few discernible feminine qualities. Had there been a Hell's Angels' auxiliary at the time, I'm sure Carol would have held a leadership position. My secretary of thirty-five years, who grew up in the same neighborhood at about the same time, knew Carol. She told me that Carol once confronted her to demand something and threatened to sit on her if she didn't do it. Carol was large enough to make this threat palpable.

The combination of my awkwardness with girls and my unfamiliarity with party protocol made my stay at Carol's seem an eternity. Some of my friends tried to encourage me, but I found it difficult to get into the spirit. My desperation grew. I was so uncomfortable I would have welcomed the company of an adult. But, of course, this was not a function where one was likely to find a chaperone.

My solution, after an hour of agony, was to slip out, head home and consult with Charlie the next day. I never got his

Charlie

attention at the party. He was too busy moving quickly from room to room.

In the next two years, I made very little social progress—in fact, I was still flashing Donna Fernhammer's picture whenever the subject of girlfriends came up. Eventually, I learned that Donna was available and might welcome a call. I was given her phone number, but I was incapable of following through. Donna Fernhammer continued to fill her important role without our ever meeting.

As for Charlie, he only became smoother and more polished. I can't think of a better way to convey our relative levels of maturity than to reveal a story that I kept under wraps for many years.

During my high school years, I led two lives: one during school and another after school. Chicago in the forties, even more so than today, was a city of small, insular neighborhoods. I am not referring to communities that have names, or even gang territories, but to those tiny enclaves of just a few streets within which most of our daily activities were confined.

With few exceptions, my neighborhood friends went to Tilden Tech, the local public high school. I took two streetcars to get to St. Rita High School several miles away. Although St. Rita was an all-boys school, it had ties with nearby girls high schools and a very social atmosphere. Unfortunately, I was too shy, unsophisticated and geographically isolated to take advantage of the opportunities. Nothing pleased me more than to get back on those streetcars and

Charlie

return to the neighborhood and friends with whom I felt comfortable.

I wanted a girlfriend but didn't feel any sense of urgency to acquire one, at least not until my senior prom loomed. Everyone began to tell me that, if I didn't attend the prom, I'd regret it for the rest of my life. In addition, some changes must have been occurring in me, because I began to get excited about the prospect. I would *go* to the prom and *jump-start* my social life. Two problems had to be addressed: I needed a date, and I had to learn to dance.

To whom could I turn? At this stage, virtually all of my friends were dating. But I didn't trust them to come up with the sort of prom date I had in mind. They would only revel in my discomfort, inquire about Donna Fernhammer and offer little real assistance. No, there was only one person who could help.

Charlie was at the top of his game. Putting myself in his hands was like hiring a lawyer who is used to taking care of delicate matters in a quiet and efficient way. He would also be tactful enough not to bring up Donna Fernhammer.

Charlie calmly took charge. He asked me to describe what I was looking for in a prom date. He listened, thought a bit and then made a suggestion. Shirley Robertson, someone I knew very casually, and who was friendly, bright and attractive, might be available. I was delighted with this idea. "Why don't you call her?" he asked. "She'll never say yes," I said. Charlie didn't try to talk me into it. "Let's walk over to her house," he said.

Charlie

Shirley lived two blocks from Al's. We climbed the long staircase to the second-floor flat where the Robertsons lived, and Charlie rang the bell. Shirley came to the door. Charlie proceeded to give her a quick, upbeat account of my situation. This is how matchmakers must have sold a prospect on a client. The difference is that I was standing in front of Shirley, listening to the negotiation and not saying a word. Charlie arranged for her to teach me to dance over a period of weeks and then to be my date for the prom. I doubt that their entire exchange took more than a few minutes. Shirley asked if I'd like to start the lessons the next day at her house. I nodded, mumbled something and then followed Charlie down the stairs.

The dance lessons were held on a regular schedule. Shirley was a good teacher and very patient, but my progress was painfully slow. As the day of the prom drew closer, I began to panic. I discovered I had no rhythm and was befuddled by most of the dance steps. I knew I'd never catch on in time.

Despite Shirley's encouragement, the words "I'm not getting it" beat on my brain. Finally, the fear of making a fool of myself at the prom overcame the fear of telling Shirley I could not go to the prom with her. The excuse I gave her was so lame that even today, I can't bring myself to confess it.

Shirley had to be in a state somewhere between bewilderment and disbelief. Given my slow progress and off-the-wall excuse, she probably felt sweet relief. I'll only add that she also possessed a strong sense of forgiveness, because we dated for a time several years later.

Charlie

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I went off to college in the fall that followed the prom disaster. Charlie had done all he could for me.

I returned home for holidays and summer vacations, but I saw less and less of Charlie. He was spending more time with another crowd and going to bars other than those I frequented. As the years passed, news of Charlie was almost exclusively secondhand and brief: "He's married." "He's drinking a lot." "He's divorced." "I think he's ill." Then no news at all.

About twenty years ago, I was walking down Lock Street not far from Al's. An elderly person was coming from the other direction. After we passed, I heard my name and turned around. "Charlie?" I said, barely recognizing him. He looked shockingly old. I was appalled, realizing how obvious my reaction must have been. He didn't want to talk much, and I didn't know what to say. We parted awkwardly.

It was the last time I saw him.

In what I regard as a supreme irony, it turned out that Charlie Warner, whose family name was once Werner, had developed Werner's syndrome, a disease that accelerates the aging process. Charlie died a few months after our last encounter.

In an interview about his play *Old Times*, Harold Pinter observed, "What interests me a great deal is the mistiness of the past. I can't remember so much, but it is not actually forgotten. It exists. I carry it with me."

Don't we all.

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